

THE DOTTED CHESTNUT: *CONISTRA RUBIGINEA*  
D. & S. (LEP.: NOCTUIDAE)

By BRIG. E. C. L. SIMSON\*

On 9th April '81 I went with a friend to try the heaths round Chobham (Surrey) for *C. rubiginea*. We arrived at the spot marked with a X on my friend's map. It was just coming on dusk, but light enough for us to see that we were facing considerable opposition, because three men were engaged in extracting generators, mercury vapour lamps and stands, sheets, bags, nets and all the dread apparatus of the expert moth-snatcher, from the boot of a car parked exactly on our X!

But now it was our X no more, and we were considering going off to search the heaths for a spot we might call Y, when my friend recognised one of the three entomologists as a person he had previously met in a Hampshire wood, when both were after *Trichopteryx polycommata* D. & S. Credentials thus established, we made a plan by which the five of us would make a large circle out on the heath, among the scattered birch trees. My nearest neighbour was about 100 yards from me and had a set-up similar to my own. It was a warm night and soon moths began appearing on my sheet; nothing very wonderful came and I suppose a couple of Scarce Prominents, *Odontosia carmelita* Esp. were the most interesting. After about an hour my neighbour of 100 yards away put out his light and soon I saw him coming towards me with all his gear. As he got level he put down his generator and came across to me. He looked really happy and the reason lay in a box, which he held under my nose. There sat a beautiful *rubiginea*, which had been beastly enough to select his sheet instead of mine. M. V. light makes one look a bit green at normal times; now I must have looked emerald bright. The lucky captor said that he had a bad leg and that was his lot for the night. So off he went hobbling, but humming, into the darkness towards the cars.

I redoubled my efforts to turn, by magic, the wretched *incerta*, which visited me, into beautiful orange-hued moths with black spots. To no avail, and about mid-night, the air having turned cold, I packed up and returned to the cars. Shortly afterwards my friend and the remaining two turned up and I found that my friend had been no more successful than I, but that the others had got two *rubiginea*; one at sugar and another to light. So between five of us three *rubiginea* had been caught. I stared, wistfully, out over the black heath.

And now a very pleasant thing occurred for me. The three, to me, strangers, came up, held out a box in which sat a *rubiginea*, and told me to take it. They said they understood that this was my fourth unsuccessful visit to the locality over the years and that they had a certain female (the one taken at sugar). They were not sure, but felt the one they had given me was also a female, and wished me to have it. It was the one taken 100 yards from my light.

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It was a charming gesture, and I was thrilled to accept. Thrilled as anyone would be who has sat on those "blasted heaths" round Chobham, spring after cold spring, hoping to box this elegant moth. So, with many expressions of gratitude, we said goodbye, and I drove home with my friend. I dropped him off at his house and he invited me in so that we could properly examine our trophy. My friend had taken quite a few male *rubiginea* in the past, but had never obtained a female from which to breed a series.

Now it is not easy to determine the sex of a live *rubiginea*, especially as a male, which has just had a good gorge at sugar, sawfly, etc, can be very fat bodied. Equally, a female which has not eaten for some time, can be slim bodied. To me the antennae of the sexes appear indistinguishable. So you must imagine the two of us peering through magnifying glasses at our moth and not getting very far, especially as a bright light made it rather skittish. So we gave it a whiff of chloroform and probed even more deeply into the matter. My friend once thought he saw an ovipositor, but I said "wishful thinking". So, as the moth came to, I put it back in the box and set off home, with my friend's pleas not to kill it, at any cost, ringing in my ears. It was a new species for me and in pretty good nick. Doubtless he felt that if it grew restless and started to damage itself, my self control might vanish. To prevent this he had even promised me a specimen *rubiginea* from his own short series.

As soon as I was home I put the moth in a plastic box lined with tissues, and went to bed. Next morning I opened the box very carefully and saw the moth asleep on the side tissue. I made up a solution of honey and brown sugar in water, soaked up as much as a piece of cotton wool could hold, put it in a bottle-top as a container, and placed it in with the moth, which still slept. I looked in the box every morning and was pleased to see that the moth had not in any way injured itself by flying round and that it had been sucking at the honey, as shown by the fluid which it had passed onto the tissues. So the days passed and twice I caught the moth with its proboscis in the bottle top. If one can tame an insect, this was certainly tamed. It showed no fear at my opening the box; it never attempted to fly and on the tenth day I saw a few pure white eggs on the edge of a tissue. I rang my friend, who came over at once and, after careful search, found 14 eggs which he took home with him to hatch. I went on giving the moth fresh honey every other day and by the 19th day of her captivity she had laid 62 eggs, though she did not lay every day. She laid no more after and, on the 21st day, she died peacefully, still clinging to the tissues. As far as I know she never flew in the box and she remained a perfect specimen, fit for any collection, except for being rather pale — but then she had lived for 6 months. My friend took all the eggs for hatching, because we were going to feed the young larvae on apple, of which he had a plentiful supply in his garden.

52 larvae hatched by 6 May and my friend brought me 26, being my share; from these I obtained 24 perfect imagos. Bred *rubiginea* has to be seen to be believed: beautiful indeed. I remain truly grateful to the three generous entomologists I met that April night.